Tsukiji shogekijo

The Tsukiji Shōgekijō (Tsukiji Little Theatre), Japan’s first successful professional theatre, was a performance space and company inaugurated by Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928) and Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959) on June 13, 1924. The theatre was pivotal for development of modern, *shingeki* (“new theatre”) style realism in Japan. The 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake opened an opportunity for new construction in Tokyo. Osanai and Hijikata purchased land in Tokyo’s Tsukiji district to build a small proscenium theatre with the latest theatrical innovations from Europe such as a plaster cyclorama. The main impact of the new company, however, came from Osanai’s agenda of developing a new, modernized style of acting and production in Japan.

Osanai shocked many in the Japanese theatre world by asserting that the company would produce Western plays exclusively. He believed this was vital for establishing a new approach to theatre and acting. The Tsukiji Little Theatre would be a “laboratory” where performers and spectators alike would study theatre. After productions of forty-four Western plays, the theatre produced its first Japanese play in 1926 after Osanai bowed to Hijikata’s persuasion and audience demand. After Osanai’s sudden death in December 1928, ideological divisions led to the theatre’s dissolution.

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Osanai’s surprise announcement, less than a month before the theatre’s opening, was a disappointment for his partner, Hijikata, as well as aspiring Japanese playwrights learning a new craft. The debate about the course modern Japanese theatre should take had started a few years earlier with Osanai facing off against the young Kishida Kunio (1890-1954), perhaps Japan’s most promising playwright of the day. Kishida disagreed with Osanai on the nature of what a performance should be, and on its function. Not only did Kishida write plays with realistic action and dialogue while Osanai at least gave lip-service to a more theatrical notion of performance, but Kishida’s intentions were strictly apolitical character studies, while most everyone involved with the Tsukiji Little Theatre had socialist leanings.

The Tsukiji Little Theatre opened with a repertory of plays by Reinhard Goering and Anton Chekov. The company began producing plays at a rapid pace, staging forty-four exclusively Western works in the first two years before staging Tsubouchi Shōyo’s (1859-1935) *En no gyōja* (En the Ascetic). Osanai’s reasons for excluding Japanese plays had little logical or theoretical basis, but it were driven by his belief that realism had run its course, and that performance, not literature, was the essence of theatre. He was also passionate about achieving a level of production and acting that was close to what he had observed in his travels to the West. Osanai felt, therefore, that Japanese actors and directors should polish their craft on works of proven theatrical merit rather than new literary pieces by untested playwrights.

The rapid pace of production, however, left the company with little time to actually pursue actor training outside of rehearsals. There were classes planned, but such training as occurred happened as a play was being mounted. Osanai and Hijikata were the only company members who could effectively teach European methods, but they were too tied up in rehearsals to hold the classes.

There were few other small venues in Tokyo, so the Tsukiji Little Theatre became influential almost by default. With few theatres available, Japanese playwrights could not get their plays produced, but ultimately Osanai could not resist the demands of Hijikata and the audience for Japanese plays.

Among the goals the company set for itself at the end of 1926 were that it would begin mounting as many original Japanese plays as possible, and expand proletarian theatre by staging socialist plays by non-Japanese. The company’s first successful Japanese production was *Aiyoku* (Passion) by Mushanokōji Saneatsu, a play that did not have a socialist agenda. All the other Japanese plays the company produced were socialist, and directed by Hijikata. The artistic differences between Osanai and Hijikata were echoed in political views, further fracturing the company. The company nurtured the talents, and socialist sentiments, of people such as Kubo Sakae (1900-58), Senda Koreya (1904-94), and Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-77). These men went on to be leaders of the *shingeki* movement after the Tsukiji Little Theatre disbanded. In a few short years, however, the company had become the Japanese model for modern theatre practices.

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